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“Drug Him Through the Street”: Hughsey Childes Describes Turn-of-the-Century Sharecropping

by Hughsey Childes/Charles Hardy

The sharecropping system that emerged in the South in the last three decades of the 19th century afforded southern black families a certain measure of control over their daily lives and labor. But the white landowners were able to use the legal mechanisms of sharecropping to assure control over the largely African-American workforce that toiled on the farms. Here Hughsey Childes, interviewed by historian Charles Hardy in 1984, described what seems like a matter of fact exchange in which the white landowner cheated the black sharecropper. But when the sharecropper got a little wise and withheld some of the crop from the landlord, the punishment was swift and final.

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Hughsey Childes: There was a man had been, was working sharecrop for a gentleman and naturally, he couldn't read or either write. And every year, regardless of how much cotton he made he would just bring him out so he would have just a little bit left. So he got kinda wise and where he would get at the harvest time. And he made six bales of cotton that year, and he took four to count on the wagon. And his white landlord that he was renting, he was sharecropping with, met him. And there are cotton bales on the street.

When the four bales of cotton was sold the amount of money they came to, they went to the bank. And naturally in sharecropping, the man that you sharecrop with, he pays for half and you pay for half. So when everything was over, he told him, he said, "You did marvelous this year, you cleared \$350." But now this 350 dollars got to last him till they start to farm again.

So the colored fellow didn't say anything at all, but in a couple of weeks he took two more bales of cotton to town. So when he [the white owner] met him he called him up and told him he wanted to see him in town. So when he met him, he said, "I had an idea that you had been cheating me, but I didn't have no way of knowing it." He said, "Now you say I don't owe you anything?" He says, "No, you paid off and you cleared \$350." He said, "Now when we sell I got two more bales of cotton." So, he says, "Why didn't you tell me that at first? Now, I got to go over all these figures, and you might clear just a little something."

So anyway from that they started a argument. And this white man jumped on him, and hitched the horses to him, like he was a wagon and drove him, and drug him through the street—in Abbeville, South Carolina—and took him down in the park, and hung him. Now that's just as

true as I'm looking at you. But you wasn't allowed to say anything about it.

Source: Charles Hardy III (Philadelphia, Penn.: Atwater Kent Museum, 1984), [West Chester University](#).

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